

VZCZCXRO9640
RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHMO #1396/01 0890655
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 300655Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8767
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHLN/AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG 3922
RUEHYG/AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG 2328
RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 2015

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001396

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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: KPRF: PEOPLE POLITICS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

REF: MOSCOW 1067

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11. (SBU) Summary: The Communist Party of Russia's (KPRF) broad-based and somewhat unexpected success in the March 11 regional elections (reftel), despite a minuscule campaign budget, is attributable to the survival of its party machine and a socialist message that resonates with voters. Although likely to be increasingly pressed by For A Just Russia (SR -- the Kremlin's left wing party) and to a lesser extent the newly-populist Union of Right Forces (SPS), KPRF has become more appealing to voters disillusioned with United Russia's monopoly on power. The KPRF's popularity is especially visible in cities, where United Russia's (YR) administrative resources are less effective. Even if KPRF can capitalize on growing dissatisfaction, it has no chance to de-throne United Russia in the December Duma elections, but it may nibble at SR's numbers. Although the KPRF improved its standing on March 11, that is unlikely to do much for party Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov's third run at the presidency in 2008. End summary.

KPRF's March Success

12. (SBU) Although estimates vary, it is clear that in the March 11 regional elections, the KPRF enjoyed a noticeable increase in support in almost all regions when compared to the 2003 Duma elections. On March 11, KPRF averages increased to 15 - 20 percent across the fourteen regions from the 10 - 15 percent it received in 2003. (KPRF's better numbers in March are partially explained by the traditionally lower turnout for the regional elections. This is thought to work to the advantage of the KPRF, which is believed to have more disciplined voters.) A campaign budget of just 25.4 million RUR (USD 1 million) -- 24 times smaller than that of the Kremlin-sponsored United Russia party -- forced the KPRF to rely on disciplined regional deputies and central committees to get the KPRF message to the regions. As Orel's KPRF representative Vasiliy Ikonnikov underscored to us on March 15, KPRF's relative success was a tribute both to its superior organizational skills and a sign of people's unhappiness with YR's track record in areas such as housing services and pensions.

13. (SBU) KPRF leadership was particularly pleased with its success in cities. In Omsk and Orel, the party snagged over thirty percent of the vote, while in the Komi Republic's second city, Ukhta, it polled 17 percent (2.5 times its 2003 results). All, according to Ukhta KPRF head and newly-elected legislator Anatoliy Ostroglazev, without the

benefit of money and administrative resources. While KPRF won just 24 percent of the vote to YR's thirty percent in Samara, it easily bested SR's sixteen percent to finish second. KPRF Central Information Technology Center Head Ilya Ponomarev reported that the KPRF had done much better across the fourteen regions in cities, and less well in rural areas; a difference he sourced to the more effective use of "administrative resources" by Kremlin parties in the countryside. Mercator Group Director Dmitriy Oreshkin concurred that the less manageable cities had blunted United Russia's edge in administrative resources.

14. (SBU) SR International Department Director Mikhail Demurin told us that he had been "very impressed" with KPRF's performance on March 11. He was convinced that the KPRF had won a significant part of the youth vote. Young KPRF sympathizers came from families whose parents were academics or intellectuals and whose status had dropped considerably during the 1990s transition, he said. Demurin surmised that the youth who are suffering the effects of "botched" education reform voted KPRF, as well. Komi's Ostroglazev also traced KPRF's success to the youth vote, claiming that 50 - 55 percent of KPRF's Komi's totals had come from 18 - 30 year olds. KPRF interlocutors all see increasing support from young people, who are having difficulty educating their children, finding housing, and who face poor employment prospects.

Not Resting on Laurels

15. (SBU) At its March 24 party convention, KPRF Deputy Chief Ivan Melnikov enumerated the party's goals in the lead-up to the December Duma elections. Melnikov described the left-positioned SR as the KPRF's chief challenge, and exhorted members to target it by highlighting its support of

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United Russia policies. With forty percent of voters backing Kremlin parties and twenty percent already committed "protest" voters (KPRF and LDPR supporters), Melnikov tasked the KPRF faithful to proselytize among the remaining, economically-straitened forty percent of the electorate by convincing it that the KPRF will better serve their interests than SR Chairman Sergey Mironov.

KPRF's Obstacles

16. (SBU) Voters' Club Strategic Head Stanislav Kulakov disagreed that KPRF's success could be traced to superior organizational skills and disaffected youth. He instead cited the Kremlin's desire to provide a manageable release valve for disgruntled voters. KPRF was "harmless." It had been in the Duma for years and had accomplished nothing, which made it acceptable to the powers-that-be.

17. (SBU) KPRF interlocutors are guardedly positive in conversations with Embassy about Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov, but there are frequent rumors that he is seen by insiders as a drag on the party. Demurin suggested that the KPRF may have peaked with the March 11 elections, a possibility he traced to the Chairman's limited public appeal and the party's failure, under Zyuganov, to fully exploit traditional bases of support, like the trade union movement.

Comment

18. (SBU) If the accounts of interlocutors are correct, the March 11 elections suggest that KPRF may be in the middle of a limited revival, fueled by voters opposed to United Russia and, to a much lesser extent, dissatisfaction among youth.

Earlier assertions by KPRF contacts that the party was recovering in the cities may have been borne out on March 11.

Still, KPRF urban voters are neither sufficiently numerous nor notably very loyal, and might be co-opted by even a slight improvement in living conditions before the next elections. Also arguing against a further surge in KPRF's popularity is the alleged intention of the "managers" of Russia's democracy to see SR further improve on its March 11 election performance, which saw it over the seven percent threshold in 13 districts a mere four months after being created.

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